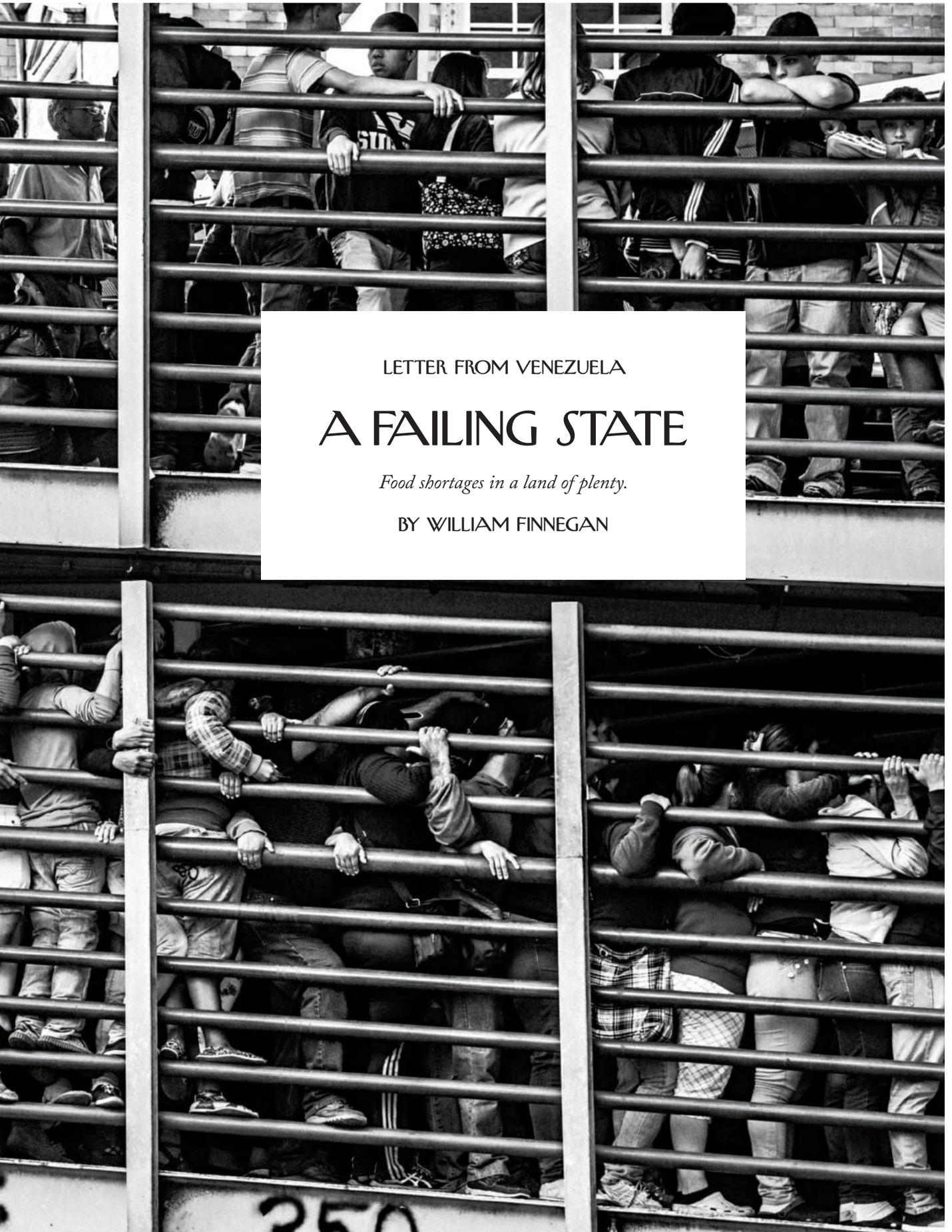


A food line: People can wait for hours—or all day—and still go home with nothing. The economy is in ruins. Full-scale food riots



LETTER FROM VENEZUELA

A FAILING STATE

Food shortages in a land of plenty.

BY WILLIAM FINNEGAN

sometimes break out. "Rice, pasta, sugar, cooking oil, bread, coffee. We produce these things. Or used to. Now they all require lines."

PHOTOGRAPH BY OSCAR B. CASTILLO

THE MEDICAL STUDENT told me to use his name. He said he didn't care. "Maduro is a donkey," he said. "An asshole." He meant Nicolás Maduro, the President of Venezuela. We were passing through the wards of a large public hospital in Valencia, a city of roughly a million people, a hundred miles west of Caracas. The hallways were dim and stifling, thick with a frightening stench. Some were full of patients waiting silently in long lines outside exam rooms. Others were dark and deserted, with the overhead lighting ripped out. The medical student, lithe and light-haired, kept us moving, peering through swinging doors, conferring with colleagues in blue scrubs.

We ducked into a room stuffed with rusted bed frames and dirty plastic barrels, where in a corner a thin young man was propped on a bed without sheets. He watched us weakly. A young woman in a pink T-shirt stood beside him, rigid with surprise. The medical student gently asked if they would answer my questions. The young man nodded. His name was Nestor. He was twenty-one. This was his wife, Grace.

Three weeks earlier, he had been ambushed on his motorbike and shot three times, in the chest and the left arm. "They were going to shoot me again, but one of the *malandros*"—bad guys—"said I was already dead. They took my motorbike." Nestor spoke slowly, his voice uninflected. His skin was waxy. The wounds to his arm and chest were uncovered, half healed, dark with dried blood. There was a saline drip in his right arm and, at the foot of his bed, an improvised contraption, made from twine and an old one-litre plastic bottle, whose purpose I couldn't figure out.

Did the hospital provide the saline?

No. Grace brought it. She also brought food, water, and, when she could find them, bandages, pain medication, antibiotics. These things were available only on the black market, at high prices, and Grace's job, in a warehouse, paid less than a dollar a day.

"The hospital doesn't even give water," the medical student said. He was watching the hallway. He studied Nestor briefly. "The lungs fill with liquid after someone is shot in the thorax," he told me. "We usually take the

bullet out if we can. But, either way, the wounds need to be drained."

Were the police investigating the robbery?

Nestor looked down. The naïveté of the question left it beneath reply. Venezuela has, by various measures, the world's highest violent-crime rate. Less than two per cent of reported crimes are prosecuted.

We had to go, the medical student said. Grace and Nestor thanked us, though we had done nothing for them. The medical student was worried about what he called "spies." He had smuggled me into the hospital through a broken back door. The regular entrances to the hospital were all manned by uniformed personnel with rifles—National Guard, mostly, but also police, both local and national, and other, less identifiable militia. Hospitals in Caracas were even more tightly secured. Why were hospitals so heavily guarded? Nobody threatened to invade them. The guards had orders, it was said, to keep out journalists. Exposés had embarrassed the government.

Most of the elevators were out of order, so we took the stairs. At night, the medical student said, these stairwells were dangerous—unlit and prowled by muggers. But how could muggers get past the guards? "They work together," he said. "They share." He took me down a grimy corridor to a heavy door, which he cracked open. Beyond it, I could see a gleaming, brightly lit hallway with freshly painted light-blue walls and a polished white tile floor. "This is the area they show visitors," he whispered. He peered at me to make sure I understood. Got it: Potemkin General. We hurried away.

I was introduced to a surgeon, who took me outside to speak. We stood under a tin roof, near piles of garbage and a deserted loading dock. The surgeon was bearded, heavyset, nervous. He looked exhausted. He did not want me to know his name, let alone use it. "We have no basic trauma tools," he said. "Sutures, gloves, pins, plates." He ran down a list of unavailable medications, including ciprofloxacin, an all-purpose antibiotic, and clindamycin, a cheap antibiotic. The doctors lost surgical patients because they had



no adrenaline. They could still do some types of blood tests, but they could no longer test for hepatitis or H.I.V./AIDS. The electricity supply was a problem. At one stage, the operating room had been closed for a week. The waiting list for surgery was now three months. In Maracaibo, a major city farther west, surgeons had been reduced to operating by cell-phone flashlight.

The surgeon headed back inside. Doctors had been fired, I knew, for talking to reporters, even for simply filing complaints about hospital conditions. The government did not want to know. There were private clinics to which high officials and Venezuelans with dollars took themselves and their families. Those who could went abroad.

"I've seen public hospitals in Chile and Argentina," the medical student said. "They're clean, fine, efficient, like they used to be here. We're going backward. All because of this government!"

Public health in Venezuela is, in fact, getting rapidly worse. In 1961, Venezuela was the first country declared free of malaria. Now its robust malaria-prevention program has collapsed, and there are more than a hundred thousand cases of malaria yearly. Other diseases and ailments long vanquished have also returned—malnutrition, diphtheria, plague. The government releases few statistics, but it is estimated that one out of every three patients admitted to a public hospital today dies there. State mental hospitals, lacking both food and medications, have been reduced to putting emaciated, untreated patients out on the streets.

We circled the hospital grounds, following a tin-roofed walkway. It was a dim, greasy day, raining lightly. We came upon a long, narrow encampment: families who had strung hammocks between the posts of the walkway or laid mattresses on the concrete, out of the rain. There were bags, baskets, baby strollers. People seemed to be camped long term.

A dark-skinned man in a hammock said that he had been there for three months. His four-year-old son was in the hospital with a low blood-platelet count. "Viral infection," the medical student told me. "Maybe Zika, or dengue. If he gets the right meds, he'll

survive." He asked the man, whose name was José, about blood tests. José said that he had raised the forty dollars for the tests, partly by begging on buses, after losing his job. Now he needed money for medicines, none of which the pharmacies had in stock. "We must buy from the mafia," he said. He meant the black market, but not just the ubiquitous profiteers known as *bachaqueros*. The medical student understood. Some of the security forces that were deployed, or self-deployed, to the hospital were in the medical-supply business.

The overstuffed entrances—all the military and police uniforms and firepower—began to make more sense. Cops and soldiers, *militares*, were notoriously underpaid. There was money to be made here. We talked to other families camped on the walkway, and on concrete benches under an awning closer to the hospital buildings. Some people were surprisingly outspoken. They denounced the prices charged for examinations (in a system of supposedly free health care), the corruption, the intimidation, the outrageous prices for sterile gauze, saline, food (when there was food), and medications. Some *militares* had the nerve to accuse the families of profiteering, and to seize their hard-won supplies when they tried to enter the hospital. These were items that, often, they had bought from other *militares*, who had looted them from pharmacies, or from shipments meant for hospitals. The worst actors were the *colectivos*, gangs of barrio toughs armed by the government and deputized as "defenders of the revolution." Their main activity, as runaway inflation and food rationing gripped the country, was shaking down and monitoring their neighborhoods, but they found opportunities around hospitals and seemingly answered to no one. (Some *colectivos* could trace their descent to urban guerrillas from the sixties who had never disarmed.)

A young woman in a wheelchair had been shot in the leg in a robbery, and was unable to get the pain reliever she needed. But that wasn't why

she was out here. She was looking after her mother, who was in the hospital. The young woman taught primary school, and her students came to school hungry, and she had some choice things to say about President Maduro. Use my name, she said. She wasn't afraid. But I didn't want to put more than her first name in my notes. If guards or the *colectivos* saw my notebooks, they might be seized.



THE REVOLUTION BEING defended is usually known, in Venezuela, as Chavismo, for its chief protagonist, Hugo Chávez, who was the country's President from 1999 until his

death, in 2013. For decades, the country had been ruled by two centrist parties that took turns winning elections but were increasingly out of touch with voters. A move to impose fiscal austerity was rejected, in 1989, with a mass revolt and countrywide looting—a paroxysm known as the Caracazo—which was put down by the Army at a cost of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of lives. Chávez was an Army lieutenant colonel, from a humble background—his parents were village schoolteachers. He crashed the national stage in 1992, by leading a military-coup attempt. The coup failed, and Chávez went to jail, but his televised declarations of noble intent caught the imaginations of many Venezuelans. He offered a charismatic alternative to the corrupt, sclerotic status quo. After his release, he headed a small leftist party and easily won the Presidency.

He soon rewrote the constitution, concentrating power in the executive. Like his hero, Simón Bolívar, the Venezuelan leader who drove the Spanish out of South America, he had regional ambitions. He used Venezuela's oil wealth, which is vast, to help cement a close alliance with Cuba and then with a number of other neighbors in South America, Central America, and the Caribbean, creating a strategic and economic bloc to counter the traditional hegemony of the United States.

Chávez was a telegenic populist with a gift for electioneering. He mesmerized the country with his Sunday TV

show, “Hello, President!” on which he railed for hours on end against his opponents, particularly the country’s traditional business élites and imperialist Washington, told jokes and stories, sang, extolled the achievements of his Bolivarian Revolution, and issued decrees, some of them consequential—the expropriation of a factory, the consignment of ten military battalions to the Colombian border. He even took to TV to order the jailing of a judge who had released a hated enemy. (In the case of the judge, the enemy was a banker who had been in jail awaiting trial for three years, which was longer than the law allowed, and the judge herself then spent three and a half years in jail—where her lawyer says she was raped—and under house arrest. Although she has never been tried, she is still forbidden to speak to the press or leave Venezuela.)

Chávez propped up the Cuban economy with cheap oil, and in return the Cubans sent thousands of doctors, to help start a network of health clinics. After Chávez barely survived a 2002 coup attempt, the Cubans also sent teams of military and intelligence advisers who taught their Venezuelan counterparts how to surveil and disrupt the political opposition Cuban-style, with close monitoring, harassment, and strategic arrests.

The Bolivarian Revolution is not the Cuban Revolution. The “twenty-first-century socialism” that Chavismo seeks to build has relied on electoral democracy; opinion polling and elections qualify as national obsessions. Chávez ruled in permanent campaign mode—there was always a referendum, a parliamentary election, a Presidential contest looming. These campaigns, lively and technically “free and fair,” were not without risk for participants. In 2003, when three million voters signed a petition calling for a Presidential recall—using a mechanism included in the 1999 constitution—their names and national-identity numbers were recorded and used to create a blacklist. Those who had signed were fired from government jobs, denied loans and contracts, and otherwise penalized. During an oil-price boom that began in 2004, the distribution of state largesse to key

constituencies went into overdrive. Chávez won nearly every important election held over fifteen years, including the recall effort.

Nicolás Maduro, a onetime bus driver and Chávez’s Vice-President, lacks the magic voter touch. He squeaked into office in a special election held in April, 2013, six weeks after Chávez died. Maduro has a mystical streak, and has told the nation that a little bird speaks to him, bringing news of Chávez from the afterlife. He calls himself “the son of Chávez,” and he and his government justify, at least to their fellow-*chavistas*, much of what they do by insisting that it represents the will of the late leader. In parliamentary elections in December, 2015, *antichavista* parties won two-thirds of the seats in the National Assembly. From that base, an opposition alliance has been demanding a referendum to recall Maduro, whose poll numbers have dropped steadily. The Maduro government is stalling, throwing up procedural roadblocks through institutions it still controls, notably the Supreme Court and the National Election Commission. If a vote is held, Maduro will very likely lose.

THE EYES OF Chávez are everywhere. It’s a stylized graphic, just a few heavy black lines, depicting eyes and brows, and you see it on billboards, T-shirts, flags, and the left sleeve of a polo shirt on a man sitting across the airplane aisle. The eyes are the first thing I see each morning when I open the curtains in my Caracas hotel room—they’re painted huge, on the building opposite. Evidently, many people find them inspiring, or comforting: El Comandante continues to watch over us.

True believers still abound. I sat with Carmen Ruiz, a trim grandmother with merry eyes, in a breezy passage between shops in a small town near Caracas called El Hatillo. “My life has improved,” she said. Ruiz grew up in poverty, in a hillside barrio called El Calvario, just above the old town of El Hatillo. She worked as a seamstress and a cook, and learned accounting, while raising four kids. The living wasn’t easy. She mentioned the terror of the

Caracazo. “We first heard of Chávez in 1992, when he attempted the coup,” she said. “My husband and I started studying his words. From jail, he was sending out strategic lines, about Venezuela’s whole situation—historical, economic, national, international. It was a complete analysis, from 1811, more than twenty constitutions. He was very wise. And we were convinced: This is the man. He was a campesino, very simple. Everybody would be equal. We started working for his release.”

For the poor, everything got better under the revolution, Ruiz said. Health care, education, housing, transportation: “Many shacks in El Calvario got new roofs. My mother, who always had the intelligence, finally learned to read, in her seventies.” In 2005, Ruiz became a member of the communal assembly—a neighborhood council meant to counter the power of mayors. She described herself, smiling shyly, as “a soldier of the revolution.” She went to work for the ministry of culture and began to study, among other things, local history. She was carrying two bags filled with books and papers, and told me that she was writing a history of El Hatillo. Her family had lived here for eight generations, “and I really want to document the history of the place. I don’t want it to be lost.”

Her ancestors, who were black and indigenous, were *cafeteros*—small coffee farmers—in the neighboring countryside. “But my great-grandfather had a big hacienda, and eighteen children, with the women who worked for him. My grandpa inherited one-eighteenth of the hacienda, and he lived well as a *cafetero*. Then modernity came. The family who had the first radio used to put it on the corner for everybody to hear news and music. The government built roads to Caracas, and rich people built big houses here. The *cafeteros* dwindled away. But the *militares* who governed us were always trying to advance their own interests. They didn’t care about anyone else.”

I asked about the current food shortages and failing hospitals. “It is an economic war totally orchestrated by fascistic factions on the right,” Ruiz explained. “In every country, you have an oligarchy, a bourgeoisie, working to prevent other groups from gaining

power. Our economic situation is imposed by outside powers, by transnational companies like Polar.”

The government constantly cites this “economic war,” secretly directed from Washington, to explain the gutted economy. Polar is Empresas Polar, Venezuela’s leading manufacturer of food and beer. Polar has been threatened with expropriation, and is harassed and vilified by the government as a treacherous bastion of capital, but it has become indispensable to feeding the country. Ruiz explained that Polar is responsible for shortages because it has reduced production. Polar’s management contends that it cannot import essential ingredients, because the government, which controls all foreign exchange, declines to provide the dollars necessary. These claims are false, according to Ruiz. “They have enough.”

I HAD AN UNSETTLING experience in El Hatillo. It was a sunny Saturday afternoon and the old plaza, which is planted with venerable shade trees and surrounded by small, brightly painted, tile-roofed houses and a pink and white colonial-era church, was packed with families. I had just found a seat on a bench when a gunfight broke out, *pop pop pop*. People started running, screaming, snatching up kids. I ran with them, away from the gunfire. There were ten, fifteen shots. I ended up dodging into a pizzeria on a side street just before the owner slammed the door shut. People were shouting, whimpering, praying.

“This never happens here,” a pizzeria worker told me. I must have looked skeptical. “*Secuestro, sí*,” he said. Kidnapping, yes. “That’s what happens in El Hatillo.”

The shoot-out had taken place across the plaza, near the entrance to a modern shopping mall. By the time I got there, the municipal police had control of the scene. The casualties were one killed, one wounded, according to a bystander. There were cars parked at odd angles with bullet holes through the windshields. The dead and the injured had been removed. But the police seemed jumpy. When I got too close, a young officer in a black vest and a green shirt lifted a shotgun, pointing the barrel at my chest. I retreated, heart



“Dear Diary: So I texted Julie and I told her that just because I’m hanging out with Linda a lot it doesn’t mean I’m not her friend anymore and she said she knows that but she just feels weird because she thinks that Linda doesn’t like her and because she thinks Linda and I have more in common, so I told her to stop worrying about what Linda thinks and she said fine but I could tell she was upset so I talked to Linda about it and she said she does like Julie and was trying really hard to be nice to her and when I told Julie what Linda had said she said she felt bad because she had been saying a lot of mean things about Linda. Anyway, I had a day off so I decided to go to the aquarium...”

in mouth. Then the cops rushed a black man standing next to me who was taking a photograph with his phone. They bundled him into a van. Did they think he was press? A mafia staff photographer? As I pieced the story together, their jumpiness became more understandable. The gunfire had started when two *malandros* on a motorbike had tried to rob an off-duty policeman. The officer turned out to have a pistol in the waistband of his jeans. After a struggle, he had shot both assailants. Now the officer was sitting on the sidewalk, his back against a wall, his girlfriend beside him, their shopping bags lined up on the curb. He had a scraped elbow, and he quietly vomited in the gutter once or twice. Otherwise, they seemed

fine. It was an unusual, almost corny vignette: bad guys pick the wrong dude to mug, get blown away.

But that wasn’t right. As I learned afterward, in a café overlooking the crime scene, the muggers knew that their target was a cop. They often attacked police officers, hoping to steal their weapons. Robbing, disarming, even killing a cop—these were highly regarded feats in criminal circles. It was one of the many reasons that being a cop sucked. A hipster bartender, tattooed and ponytailed, said that the café’s patrons had hit the floor when the gunfire erupted. Once it stopped, though, people were enraged. They wanted to go into the street and lynch the *malandros*.

Looking around the café, I found

that scenario impossible to picture. People had returned to their meals, their WhatsApp chats, their conversations. I had read about an epidemic of lynchings in Venezuela, seen the gory images of crowds beating accused thieves and rapists, even burning suspects alive. But surely those things happened only in desperate shantytowns, not in leafy, funky, elegant El Hatillo. But I later looked online and found images of men stripped, beaten, and left for dead in broad daylight by mobs in Chacao, the upscale Caracas area where my hotel was.

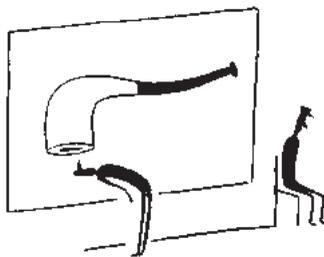
The mayor of El Hatillo, David Smolansky, said that violent crime—what everyone in Venezuela calls *la inseguridad*—is deliberate policy. “It’s part of the plan,” he said. “This anarchy.” We were talking in the conference room of a small clinic, because it wasn’t safe, that day, for the Mayor to be in his office. The government was jailing opposition leaders in advance of a planned protest march, and Smolansky had calculated, probably rightly, that he might be next. He is a hulking thirty-one-year-old, with a full beard and watchful eyes. Impunity, he said, made it difficult to fight crime even on the local level. In the first seven months of the year, he said, his municipal police had arrested a hundred and eleven suspects. Eighty-eight of them had been released without charges by corrupt judges. “The government knows it’s probably going to need those gangs to maintain power.” He had fired dozens of cops for corruption and misbehavior. A house robbery had been caught on video surveillance. They were able to positively identify six robbers. All six were cops, and not one of them was in jail today.

Smolansky was at least proud to say that kidnapping was down. Of course, he admitted, he was talking only about reported kidnappings. Most were never reported; it was safer to try to settle them privately, with a negotiated ransom. *La inseguridad*, he said gloomily, “puts everybody in their houses by 6 or 7 P.M. Just like the dictator wants.”

It’s understandable that angry Venezuelans talk about “the dictatorship.” Their rights are under siege. But real dictatorships impose order. Hugo

Chávez worshipped at the feet of Fidel, who would not tolerate one-tenth of the disorder, street crime, and gun violence that plague Venezuela. To be fair, crime was already rampant when Chávez came to power, and people hoped that, as a military man, he would be able to rein in the *malandros*. But Chávez showed little interest in law enforcement. He even objected to the idea of a professional police force. That would be a “police of the bourgeois state.” Crime was a result of poverty, inequality, and capitalism. Today, researchers estimate that the annual number of homicides is as high as ninety per hundred thousand people. The government says it is only fifty-eight per hundred thousand. Whatever. In 1984, the number was between eight and ten.

“*Avanza, avanza.*” Forward, forward. An old woman picks up her plastic chair. Another woman, Maribel Guzmán, hoists her bags. Everybody shuffles a few yards. They’re waiting on a food line for a supermarket in the La Trinidad neighborhood of Caracas. The supermarket is not in sight. It’s around the corner, up a hill, around another corner, on a different street. Guzmán is from Monagas, in eastern Venezuela. “I came to Caracas to find food,” she says. She is forty-one. She left her family in Monagas and found a job here, in the



capital, as a housekeeper. She has an agreement with her employer—she works an extra half day each week in exchange for the day she needs to stand in *la cola* to buy food. Her family back home depends on her: “Last Wednesday, I got only toilet paper, and I thought, Oh, my God, what am I going to send home? They need food.” Today, she’s hoping for two kilograms of flour and two hundred grams of butter. She’s been in line all

day. It’s now late afternoon. She is still several hundred yards from the supermarket’s door.

You’re allowed to queue up for price-controlled items only on certain days of the week, and those days are determined by the last digit on your *cédula*—your national-identity card. Several people show me their *cédulas*. They all have numbers that end in 3—that’s today. A woman with a parasol says that last week she waited from 8 A.M. to 5 P.M. and went home with nothing. Today, she’s hoping for flour and toothpaste. A television repairman says that he arrived at 3 A.M. but decided that it was too dangerous at that hour and left. “The National Guard usually arrives around five-thirty, and security improves after that. The store opens at seven or seven-thirty.” There are often robberies in food lines—“They’ll even take your glasses,” the TV repairman says—and, of course, fights. Full-scale food riots break out sometimes. Many supermarkets have been sacked. The National Guard can itself be dangerous, though not in this neighborhood.

Venders sell orangeade, single cigarettes, and cheap Popsicles to the people on line. A sallow bank clerk waits with his dreadlocked sixteen-year-old son. I ask him about his work. “Computer security,” he says. His wife is a hairdresser, now working out of their apartment. She has started asking her clients to pay her with food. This is their youngest child. The older ones are still at home, too. Young people can’t afford rent. I ask why. The clerk studies me. He seems immensely tired and sad. “Inflation,” he says. “Lack of production. The government needs to invest. The factories in this area all closed. Chávez closed them in 2000.”

Other people join in: “Rice, pasta, sugar, cooking oil, bread, coffee. We produce these things. Or we used to. Now they all require lines.” Polar is mentioned. Without Polar, there would be no arepas—corn cakes, the Venezuelan national dish.

PRESIDENT MADURO, IN his rambling, belligerent speeches on radio and TV, frequently accuses Polar’s owner, Lorenzo Mendoza, of waging economic war on Venezuela and on his

THE BRIDE TREE LIVES THREE TIMES

In willing textures where the wood rat lives
the drought lets trees die twice.

Realism & magic steady one another
& the hurt in your heart
from the human fact
circles the edge of the park. The bride
tree blooms late this year, its nature
stored at the edge of day—

some like to avoid the word “nature”
but what to put in its place
for ants & thoughts & parking meters,
stars & skin & granite, quarks,
the world above & below ...
When you are confused about poetry
& misunderstand its brown math,
the sessile branches & a seal of awe

attach the tree to the dark.

Someday, you'll need less evidence;
the missing won't cease to exist.
For now, you stop to eat the free fruit
only you knew would appear
& for that you have your human hands,
infinite nature, a single
body standing on this earth—

—Brenda Hillman

government by deliberately creating shortages. He has called Mendoza a thief, a coward, a hypocrite, a traitor, a bandit, an oligarch, and a long-haired devil. He seems particularly offended by Mendoza's hair style—how it falls to one side, just so. But the real source of Maduro's obsession, according to a former Presidential aide, is his belief, expressed often in private meetings, that Mendoza wants his job.

Mendoza denies having political ambitions. And Polar, which was founded by his grandfather, as a beer company, in 1941, actually stands out among big Venezuelan enterprises for its record of careful abstention from politics. But having survived seventeen years of Chavismo—and innumerable threats of expropriation, as the government seized more than a thousand factories and farms—is itself a potent political statement. Mendoza, who is fifty-one, studied engineering at Fordham and management at M.I.T. *Forbes*

estimates his net worth to be \$1.5 billion. He rarely gives interviews, or speaks publicly, but when he does defend himself or his company he can be trenchant. After Maduro accused Polar of failing to produce enough corn flour, Mendoza publicly offered to lease from the government some of the corn-flour plants it had seized from other companies. Polar could produce far more than the state did, he said. Nobody seemed to doubt that assertion. “He's so logical,” an admirer told me. “That's what bothers the *chavistas* the most.” Maduro did not acknowledge the corn-flour offer.

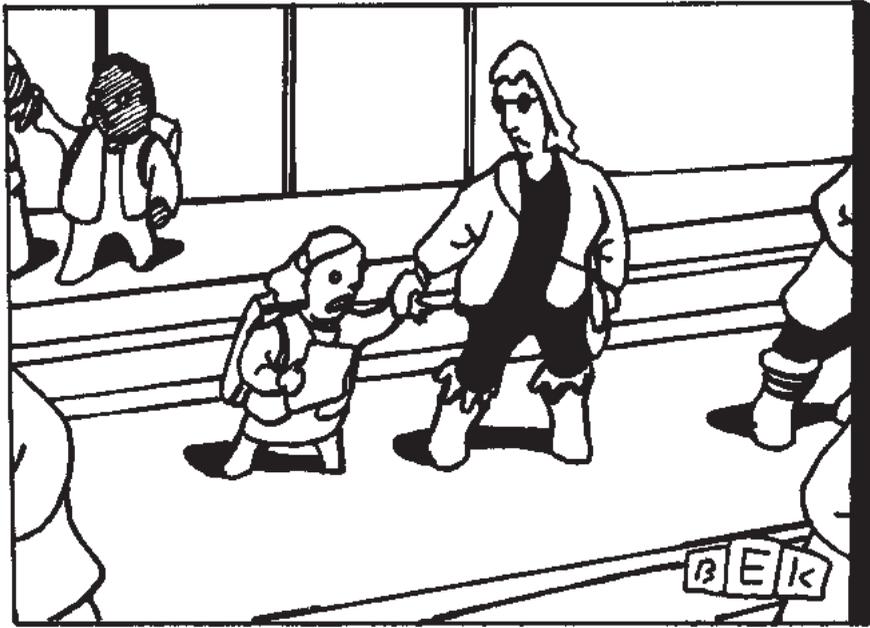
Polar employs about thirty thousand workers (it is the country's largest private employer) and is responsible for more than three per cent of Venezuela's non-oil gross domestic product. Besides corn flour and the country's top-selling beer, Polar produces pasta, rice, tuna fish, wine, ice cream, yogurt, margarine, ketchup,

mayonnaise, and detergent. Yet it operates in an atmosphere of continual uncertainty, its planners and logistics mavens never sure what roadblock or subterfuge the government will toss up next.

I stopped in at Polar headquarters, in Caracas. The press officer seemed happy to show me around, although he insisted that I not quote employees. The government jumped on every stray comment from Polar. Suffice it, then, to say that people seemed thrilled to be working there, and beleaguered by official obstructionism and shortages, and determined to fight institutional decapitation. Every single delivery of goods required a permit. Last year, inspection teams descended on Polar facilities around the country thirteen hundred times. They disrupted work, and often carried off both files and personnel. Managers and workers were arrested, accused of hoarding or price gouging or, in many cases, of offenses yet to be determined. Amid red tape, harassment, shortages of nearly everything, and the chronic lack of hard currency, few plants were operating at full capacity. Some were idle.

I visited a Polar brewery in San Joaquín, west of Caracas. It was an enormous place, built in the seventies. Its eighteen towering yellow silos, topped by a neon sign with the company's polar-bear logo, were visible from miles away. SEBIN, the national intelligence service, had staged a raid in July and arrested the manager. The factory was producing at only sixty per cent of capacity. Still, when I saw the giant silver fermentation chambers, different vats for different malts and Pilsners, immaculate labs, conveyor belts, forklifts, and trucks loaded with product, that seemed like a huge amount. It was a glimpse of an alternative Venezuela.

From the factory, one could see the hulking, rusting slabs of an unfinished high-speed railway. It was part of a mega-project that predated Chávez, a rail network intended to knit together Venezuela's ports, cities, and industrial centers. Only a few miles had been completed. This section, meant to connect a distant inland town to a port in the north, had been abandoned five years earlier. Some of the migrant



"The school wants all the mothers who come to pick up in tights and crazy boots to dress better."

construction workers left unemployed, I was told, had stayed in the area and formed a gang known as the Aragua Train—Aragua was the next state east—which preyed on local residents, businesses, and travellers on the national highway. The gang is part of a criminal network that's headquartered in a federal prison at Tocarón, just across a lake from the Polar factory. Tocarón is famous for many things. Ransoms for the return of kidnapping victims or stolen vehicles can reportedly be paid in cash at the prison's front gates. The crime bosses in Tocarón have built a disco thought to be the best in Venezuela. They live in detached houses on the grounds beside manicured playing fields. They've even built a swimming pool. I didn't believe the swimming-pool story until I checked it out on Google Earth.

VENEZUELA HAS, BY some measures, the world's worst-performing economy. It suffers from the world's highest inflation rate—nearly a hundred and eighty per cent last year, with projections for this year as high as seven hundred per cent, according to the International Monetary Fund. Meanwhile, the economy as a whole

shrank by nearly six per cent last year, and is expected to shrink by between eight and ten per cent this year. Price controls on staple goods, meant to keep those goods affordable and constrain inflation, have instead helped cause critical shortages. Currency controls—established by Chávez in 2003, in an effort to stop capital flight—fix the exchange rate of the bolivar, which is accepted nowhere outside Venezuela, and create a roaring black market for dollars. A dollar is worth about sixteen hundred bolivares at the moment. The official exchange rate for importing essential goods is ten. Between those two figures, the space for financial mischief is effectively immeasurable. The government just keeps printing money, with no relationship to production, helping to fuel ruinous inflation. It has been reported that high-denomination bills will be issued in December, but for now the largest Venezuelan note is still a hundred bolivares. That's six cents. To pay cash for a night in a hotel requires a suitcase stuffed with bills.

The standard explanation for this fiasco turns on the price of oil. The truth is more discouraging. Venezuela sits on the world's largest proven oil

reserves. Oil accounts for ninety-six per cent of the country's export earnings. When the oil price plunged two years ago, it sparked the present economic disaster. But the price has since rebounded, and oil now trades in a middling range, and the Venezuelan economy continues to crater. The government's foreign reserves are around a third of what they were in 2009, which forces difficult choices. Will the limited dollars go to pay the government's creditors or to feed schoolchildren? Venezuela's largest creditor is China, which takes most of its payments in oil. The government has managed to stave off default so far, at the expense of its citizens.

In the late nineteen-seventies, Venezuela was the richest country per capita in South America. The Concorde was flying weekly from Paris to Caracas. But the "resource curse" that afflicts many mineral-rich, particularly oil-rich, nations—reducing incentives to develop other industries, exacerbating inequality as élites hog oil rents and fail to build a strong individual-income-tax base—began to hit Venezuela hard in the eighties and nineties. The economic collapse, that is, had started long before Chávez came to power—indeed, the country's growing desperation led to the embrace of Chávez. Oil had been nationalized in 1976, and displaced foreign owners had been compensated. Crony capitalism, irresponsible policies, and long-term looting of the country's wealth were gathering steam.

Chávez promised to stop the looting, and he did eventually direct a much higher percentage of oil rents to housing, education, and health care for the poor. He cut the poverty rate, which was spiking before he took office, nearly in half. Like many of his predecessors, Chávez understood the need for reducing the country's dependence on oil, and yet the opposite occurred. He deepened the state's control of the oil industry and seized private businesses, factories, and large commercial farms. The new management of these enterprises was rarely able to keep them alive. Overgrown fields, shuttered factories, empty warehouses, and abandoned infrastructure projects litter the landscape today. Non-oil exports fell

steadily as the productive economy hollowed out.

In 2008, when the global financial crisis battered the oil price, Venezuela got a foretaste of the current crisis. The Army was put in charge of food distribution. Soldiers are not trained to understand the global supply chain. Supermarkets emptied, people went hungry, and food ended up on the black market. Later, a hundred thousand tons of food was found rotting in warehouses at the ports. Today, there is a brigadier general in charge of cooking oil; another is assigned to laundry soap, body soap, shampoo, toothpaste, and deodorant.

Over the years, senior officers discovered that import-export was a lucrative field. Chávez and his military had a warm relationship with the main guerrilla army in neighboring Colombia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which was involved in narco-trafficking. Venezuela had long been a main transshipment route for cocaine going north. Venezuelan generals ran the Cartel of the Suns, referring to a military insignia. Chávez and Maduro came to preside over a kleptocracy. State contracts were awarded without competitive bidding to companies connected to the leadership. Huge amounts of money have simply disappeared.

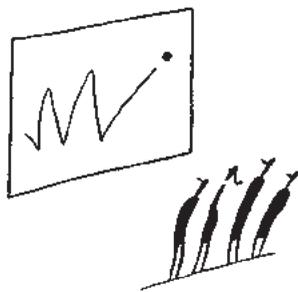
Few airlines fly to Caracas today. Paying bills owed to foreign air carriers is not a government priority. Lufthansa left in June, swallowing a loss of more than a hundred million dollars. American Airlines wrote off more than half a billion dollars in Venezuela earlier this year. At the Caracas airport, unwary travellers are robbed, and worse, by taxi-drivers. The sensation of being monitored—by suspicious officialdom, by scammers, by predators—is thick in the airport. But a mood of grief is thicker still. People sob in check-in lines, on the way to security. Parents watch grown children shuffle toward flights to *afuera*—the outside, the world beyond Venezuela—as if they might never see them again. It's a mass emigration: perhaps two million already gone, many of them young. They go to Spain, Colombia, Panama, the United States, the Dominican Republic, Argentina, Chile, Mexico—

wherever their passports will take them.

In Caracas, “For Sale” signs (“*Se Vende*”) on houses and shops are common. But the signs often lack basic contact information. That's because, I was told, it's dangerous to advertise your phone number. Criminals, knowing that you own property, may call with extortion demands and kidnapping threats. Better to let potential buyers ask around the neighborhood, where their faces can be seen.

ESTHER ROMERA, WHO is fifty-three and was born in Caracas, had some distant roots in Spain, so that was where she and her family would go. Romera owned a sweetshop in El Hatillo, known for its *golfeados*—sticky buns with cinnamon and cane sugar. The first time I stopped there, she apologized. There was no flour, therefore no *golfeados*. The *bachaquero* wanted eighty dollars for a bag of flour, and she couldn't afford that. She had other sources, though. Maybe Saturday.

Romera used to be a schoolteacher. She raised two kids, and opened her first shop, on the plaza in El Hatillo, ten years ago. It flourished, and she expanded, serving many types of coffee and *golfeados*. El Hatillo had good restaurants, which drew families from central Caracas, and also foreign tourists. “French, Italian, American,” she said. “Then *la inseguridad* got worse,



and they stopped coming. The Chinese, who work with the government, kept coming, but six months ago even they stopped.”

Romera had to downsize, moving to a smaller place, off the plaza. Her menu was on the wall, with the price list papered over and new prices scribbled in. Every restaurant did that. Inflation sent costs up too fast to do anything else. “One *golfeado* used to be fifteen bolivares,” she said. “Now it's

nine hundred and fifty. In the past, a family of five would come in and buy five *golfeados*. Now, if I have *golfeados*, a family of five will come in and buy one and divide it into five parts.”

Romera's mother was doddering around the shop. She was quite old, and had a timid, worried smile.

“Here's how things have changed,” Romera said. “When I got married, my husband and I both worked and we waited eight years to have kids. By then, we had a house and a car. We sent our children to private schools, to university. Now my daughter, who is twenty-six, can't buy a car or afford an apartment.” The three of them were leaving for Spain in November.

I nodded toward her mother. Romera shook her head, very slowly. They would not be taking her.

TOMORROW MORNING, ROMERA said, she and her neighbors would be out on the Santa Fe *autopista*, marching. The opposition was planning a major protest, calling it the Toma de Caracas—the Taking of Caracas—and the government was doing its best to scare people away. Highways into Caracas had been blocked. There were soldiers everywhere in the city, checkpoints at major intersections, machine-gun nests by bridges and tunnels. It would be dangerous. I was surprised that Romera was marching, considering that she was about to move to Spain. “We got the signatures,” Romera said indignantly. She meant that the opposition had collected close to two million signatures, far more than legally required, to force a referendum on Maduro's Presidency. “They have to hold the referendum. The march is a form of social pressure on the government to hold the recall.”

“*Sí, hay futuro.*” Yes, there is a future. This plaintive battle cry is ubiquitous in Venezuela: on billboards, placards, T-shirts. It's the opposition's slogan, but it's everybody's nagging worry. Is there, really, a future? “The opposition” is a blanket term for many parties that have formed an *antichavista* coalition called the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD). The government routinely describes the MUD as “rightists,” although few, if any, of the coalition's parties can be described as right wing,

as we understand the term. The bigger parties in the coalition are mostly social-democratic. There are far-left members. The most conservative elements of the MUD are Christian Democratic and neoliberal. It's a broad coalition, which is its main problem as it vies for power—it has no leader, no single figure to coalesce around.

Before the march, which was scheduled for September 1st, I stopped at the offices of *El Nacional* to see how the independent press planned to cover it. A deputy editor, Elías Pino Iturrieta, said that the hottest item would be the photographs. The organizers were talking about putting a million people in the streets. The government, determined to prevent aerial shots of a big crowd, had banned drones and private airplanes over Caracas. “We’re looking for roofs and the penthouses of tall buildings now, getting permission,” Pino Iturrieta said. “The *colectivos* will be out, attacking anybody with a camera, anybody writing anything down. You can be standing on the corner painting the mountains, they’ll attack you. And the police will stand and watch. They attacked us yesterday morning.”

I had seen, on my way into the building, a crew cleaning its front windows. The glass had been pelted with bags of excrement. “There were two Molotov cocktails that didn’t explode,” Pino Iturrieta said. “And pamphlets that called us a fascist newspaper. It was the third attack this year. The police will do nothing. No investigation. They have no interest in the security of employees here.”

After years of government assault on the press, *El Nacional* is one of the last independent national dailies still standing. National television and radio stations were closed when their licenses came up for renewal. Three years ago, a state company took control of paper distribution, and it refused to sell to *El Nacional*. The daily began buying from papers in Colombia, Peru, and Puerto Rico. “But we’ve had to go from six sections down to two,” Pino Iturrieta said. “Thank God for the Web.” *El Nacional* has the most visited Web news site in Venezuela, but advertising has become a problem: “Companies feel pressured not to ad-

vertise in *El Nacional*.” I could also see how the local Holiday Inn managers might think twice about having their ads appear alongside carefully reported accounts of torture.

On the eve of the march, the MUD held a mass meeting in an old union hall in downtown Caracas. The hall was jammed and smelled of sweat. These were working people, most of them not young. A parade of speakers fired up the group. A congressman from Caracas, who had been jailed for three months and then released without charges, shouted, “We’re going to take Miraflores!” People roared. I was startled: Miraflores Palace is the White House of Venezuela. The Maduro government regularly accuses the MUD of planning a coup, and the MUD always denies such intentions. Was the plan really to march on Miraflores? That was the plan when nineteen people died in a march in 2002.

Caracas is laid out east to west, nestled in a long, lush mountain valley parallel to the Caribbean coast. The old downtown, El Silencio, houses the seat of government power—Miraflores, the National Assembly, the Supreme Court—and is near the west end of the city. The march was organized to have seven starting points, most of them miles east of El Silencio, with a plan to converge at some great junction. But where would it go from there? The protest would be peaceful, the organizers said, but they always said that. The government was planning a counter-march, convening thousands of loyal *chavistas* near Miraflores.

The headliner at the union hall was Henry Ramos Allup, the leader of the National Assembly and the head of the Democratic Action Party. A slight, wiry man in his seventies, with big eyeglasses and a gray brush cut, he is a throwback to the pre-Chávez era. Democratic Action was one of the two parties that had traded the Presidency back and forth for nearly forty years, into the nineteen-nineties. Unlike the screamers and fist-shakers who preceded him, Ramos Allup was calm, worldly, almost professorial. He talked about the support that the opposition had from other countries in Latin America—and you knew that he had been speaking to their leaders. He urged people to be

nice during the march, including to bus drivers. His comic timing was good. Chávez, he said, was psychotic. The country was now suffering the terrible fallout from his fantasies and obsessions. But Ramos Allup’s body language was unaggressive, his hands limp, sometimes raised as if to protect himself. In recent opinion polls, Ramos Allup was the public’s first choice for President, far ahead of Maduro. Now I could see why. People were nostalgic for the era of bourgeois democracy, for a Venezuela that worked. Not a soldier, not a raving messiah in a red beret, but a mensch in a baggy business suit who knew how to run a government. In truth, Ramos Allup can be fierce, and he has a long history to live down—his political enemies might not all agree that he’s a mensch—but the crowd that night adored him.

ON THE MORNING of September 1st, it was difficult to tell how many marchers had turned out for the protest. I wanted to follow the stream that would be the spear point if the marchers headed for El Silencio. But on the previous evening the original gathering place for that stream had been filled by tanks and soldiers, so people massed about a half mile northeast, outside the headquarters of the Democratic Action Party. The narrow streets were packed in every direction. The protesters wore white—the opposition’s color—and sang, “It’s going to fall! It’s going to fall! The government is going to fall!” Everybody was in sneakers, prepared to walk or, if necessary, run.

A drone appeared overhead, twirling between trees and telephone wires, red video light blinking, and marchers laughed and screamed and waved. Henry Ramos Allup emerged from his party’s building, in a scrum of bodyguards, and the crowd set off south, toward Avenida Libertador, a main east-west thoroughfare. People thrust “HAY FUTURO” and “YO TE REVOCO” (“I recall you”) placards skyward, and danced in place when forward movement stalled. The critical question was which direction this large, loud stream of marchers would go when it reached the Avenida Libertador, which had been closed to traffic.

The march went east, toward other streams of marchers coming from that direction. Spirits, which were already buoyant, seemed to soar. There would be no bloody confrontation near Miraflores. National Guard soldiers, in riot gear, began to appear in ranks, but they stayed at the margins of the wide, sunny avenue. The march passed between red brick high-rises—public housing built by Chávez. Red flags and red shirts hung from some apartment windows: signals, middle fingers, from loyal *chavistas*. White shirts and white bed-sheets streamed from other windows: support for the opposition. The marchers shook their fists in solidarity and shouted, “The government is going to fall!”

Caracas was not taken that day. The government succeeded in channelling the multiple streams of the opposition march into different routes that never converged, and the stream I was in petered out around noon, with a few speeches in front of a Burger King. But the government did not succeed at preventing aerial (or penthouse) photographs, which showed an enormous, city-filling turnout.

The street fighting started in the afternoon. I first saw a car set alight on a freeway in Chacao, and then armed officers firing tear gas and chasing scattered groups of demonstrators down a shopping street. The demonstrators seemed much younger than most of the people who had marched that morning, and, once the tear gas began, many wore vinegar-soaked bandannas pulled up over their mouths and noses. Others wore gas masks. A bookstall vender frantically tried to close up shop before a wave of sooty tear gas engulfed him and his kiosk. If he ran for it without locking up, his stock would be stolen by looters. He and his bookstall disappeared into a toxic smoke cloud while the rest of us rushed away from the advancing police.

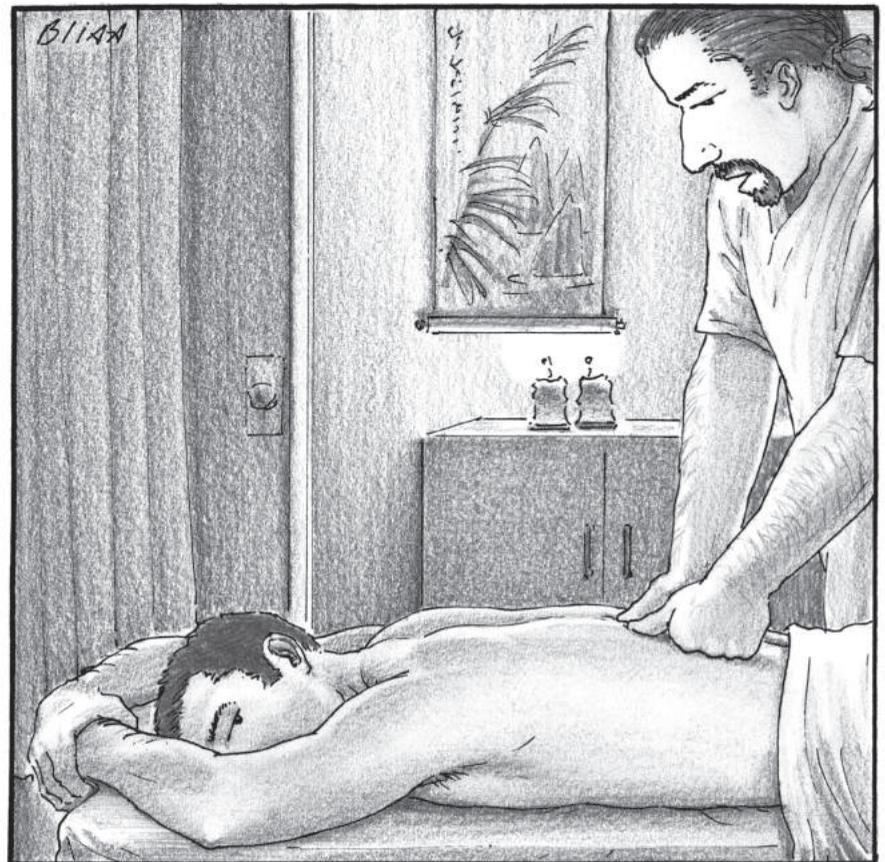
ALTHOUGH THE OPPOSITION has been growing in recent months, independents are still a major group. “Thirty-three per cent,” a local pollster told me. “They oppose Maduro but don’t support the opposition.”

Hermogenes José Liendo and Yolly Zambrano live outside, or alongside,

the political binary that seems, at a glance, to define Venezuela. Like most of their countrymen, they have campesino family roots but were born and raised in the city. They grew up together in Petare, a sprawling hillside barrio in east Caracas, where they were high-school sweethearts. They’ve been married for thirty-five years. She is a nurse; he owns and drives a Land Cruiser taxi on the steep and narrow streets of upper Petare. He showed me his taxi rig one sunny morning. It’s a heavy-duty beast, built in 1980, now painted sky blue, with seating for ten on facing benches (two more up front) and, stencilled across the windshield, “PANCRACIO,” for the patron saint of the young. Liendo drives two routes, both of them absurdly steep, with switch-back turns and clearances best measured in millimetres. Riding with him is a master class in pothole dodging and neighbor greeting. “*Hola, guapo!*” “*Hey, Jesús!*” “*Hey, Coyote!*” The cries come from inside houses, from balconies and motorbikes. Petare is an astounding maze of improvised brick cliff

dwellings, many of them multistory, all of them beyond the dull comprehension of building codes. Liendo charges forty-five bolivares a trip—less than a nickel. He belongs to an association of twenty-four jeep drivers. “We used to work till 11 P.M., but now we knock off at eight or nine, because of the *delincuencia*,” he said. He has never been robbed or attacked—the *malandros* have a special interest in his well-being. He ferries wounded fighters down the mountain to hospitals from places where no ambulance would come to get them.

“Petare was all *chavista*,” Liendo, who is soft-spoken and solidly built, told me. Zambrano agreed. He remembered clearly the brief, electrifying appearance of Chávez on TV after the failure of his coup in 1992. Liendo had grown up in a Democratic Action home. He broke with the old party and voted for Chávez in 1998. So did Zambrano. Her mother, who read three newspapers a day, was devoted to the Social Christian Party, the other major party at the time, and she had been



“You’re holding a lot of homophobia in your lower back.”



appalled when her daughter bolted, in the early nineteen-nineties, to a far-left party. Zambrano, a handsome woman of fifty-one, gave me a nod. Yes, she had been an ultra-leftist in her day.

Chávez built schools and health-care clinics in Petare. The clinics were staffed by Cuban doctors, and were open seven days a week, even at night. But corruption and bad management began to take their toll, and by 2008 Petare had an opposition mayor. The clinics are now either abandoned or rarely open, with few medicines. Garbage lies uncollected, unlicensed vendors jam the barrio's narrow streets and stairways, and crime gets ever worse. "I don't like any politician right now," Zambrano said.

She works at two hospitals. Her specialty is surgical preparation, but there are fewer surgeries being performed now, owing to a lack of basic supplies.

"I don't know why the government won't accept international help," Liendo said. "People are dying while the government worries about its pride."

IN JANUARY, THE National Assembly declared a humanitarian emergency, and in May it passed a law allowing Venezuela to accept international aid. President Maduro scorned the idea, saying on national television, "I doubt that anywhere in the world, except in Cuba, there exists a better health system." Instead of accepting aid, Maduro

declared a state of emergency that allows him to rule by decree.

"¡Gringo, respeta!" is a popular *chavista* graffito, and the slogan expresses historical grievances that are deep and wide throughout Latin America. It's true that the Maduro government's cruel and obtuse denial of its people's suffering is often ascribed to *chavista* pride, but it's more than that. The crisis has a small but crucial constituency, starting with the generals and other high government officials who are thriving financially, mainly through smuggling, graft, and import fraud. Then there are the *boliburgueses*, a new-money business elite riding high on government contracts, cronyism, and money laundering. A stampede of foreign do-gooders and international financial auditors into Venezuela would probably mean trouble for them.

A Maduro-recall referendum would be even worse. "He would lose, and where could these guys go?" a local analyst asked me. "What country would even take them? They won't have a very comfortable exile in Kazakhstan." Repression increased markedly after the death of Chávez, an escalation often attributed to a consolidation of power by hard-liners in the government. The circus-tent populism of Chávez gave way to an even less accountable, charmless tropical Leninism. And yet ideology seems increasingly irrelevant to a true description of power in Venezuela. The regime seems to be in survival

mode. In late October, Maduro and his allies on the election commission, recognizing that elections have become unwinnable, suspended the recall process indefinitely. The opposition staged angry protests throughout the country, and called for a general strike. The government threatened to expropriate businesses and factories that closed in support of the strike, and underlined the threat by surrounding Polar's headquarters in Caracas and the home of Lorenzo Mendoza and his family with heavily armed SEBIN agents. The strike fizzled.

But the political crisis continues, and the Vatican has sent an envoy to convene a "dialogue" between the government and the opposition. This gambit effectively split the MUD. One of its main partners, the Popular Will Party, whose leader, a former Caracas mayor named Leopoldo López, has been jailed since 2014, declined to join the discussion. It is, to be sure, difficult to see what there is to discuss. Maduro and the *chavistas* are determined not to relinquish power, and seem willing to flout the law, denying Venezuelans the right to choose their leaders.

The military is the wild card in every scenario. For much of Venezuela's history, the military has had a hand in ruling the country. Today, ordinary soldiers are clearly suffering from the same food scarcity as all poor Venezuelans. Liendo, who was once a conscript, told me, "The military loses respect when you see soldiers selling potatoes and onions at the side of the road." One hears persistent talk about how Maduro is besmirching the military's dignity with his economic failures. The subtext is a wan hope that the military will step in, perhaps by forcing Maduro to follow the law and hold the recall election. No one says this in public.

Understanding Venezuela's failing state as just another failure of socialism, and of statism generally, is ahistorical. Venezuela before Chávez was often extravagantly statist. Corruption has been a major problem in every era. Even dire food shortages are not new. These things happened under capitalism, too, as did intense political repression. Today's crisis is for most people the worst in memory, but it is not all about

socialism. The predatory state, the extreme insecurity, the sheer weakness of the rule of law—these are problems more profound, at this stage, than a traditional left-right analysis can clarify, let alone begin to solve.

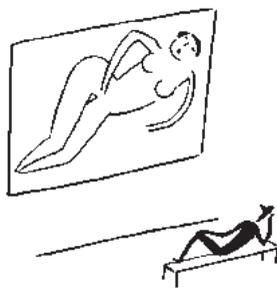
THE STORY OF the oil bonanza is inscribed on the land around Lake Maracaibo, and on the lake itself. It's an enormous shallow estuary, five thousand square miles, in the hot, dry, northwest corner of Venezuela. Forty-three billion barrels of oil have been pumped from the Maracaibo Basin since 1914. Rusting tank farms line the shores of the lake. Petrochemical complexes glitter in the brushlands at night. Oil platforms, many of them abandoned, stud the lake's surface. Snaking across the lake's bottom are fifteen thousand miles of pipeline. The water is dense with sulfates, fluoride, nitrogen, detergent, fecal coliform. Huge blooms of noxious duckweed look, from above, like pea-green wigs spread out in the sun. Oil leaks from the pipelines shine in gassy, muted rainbows. The leaks have reportedly multiplied since Chávez nationalized seventy-six oil-services companies, in 2009. The government blames the leaks on "sabotage." Far more likely, they stem from lack of maintenance and from the depredations of thieves, who work the lake in boats. A long-running turf war between rival mafias was reportedly settled in recent years by dividing the lake down the middle. La Familia Leal runs the western shore, which includes the city of Maracaibo, Venezuela's second largest, with a population of two million. La Familia Meleán runs the eastern shore, which has more oil facilities.

The bulk of investment in Venezuelan oil has shifted in recent years to new fields in the east, in a region called the Orinoco Belt, where the proven reserves are immense. There are still nineteen billion barrels of proven reserves in the Maracaibo Basin, though. That's more oil than Mexico and Norway combined have.

And yet Venezuelan oil production is steadily falling. Since 1998, it has declined by thirty per cent—by nearly a million barrels a day. Corruption and

lack of maintenance are the culprits most often cited. Crime gangs also exact a heavy tax. The state-owned oil and gas monopoly, *Petróleos de Venezuela* (P.D.V.S.A.), was Chávez's piggy bank. Between 2001 and 2015, it poured perhaps a hundred billion dollars into his favored programs. Today, the piggy bank is nearly empty. Two-thirds of oil-export revenues go to paying the Chinese and other creditors. Until recently, the monopoly was able to use Citgo, its American refining unit, to obtain loans in international credit markets, but the government has destroyed its credit rating, and it is no longer able to borrow on international markets. With the recent collapse of the oil price, it is scrambling just to service its debts.

The oil won't simply stop flowing. In the city of Maracaibo, it's clear that there's still plenty of money around. Fancy new high-rises line the lakefront on the north side of town. Massive banks with blue glass walls loom downtown. José Feliciano is coming to play in the convention center. I asked my driver, a local woman, about the lakefront high-rises. "Money laundering," she said cheerfully. The apartments were investments, she said, owned by mafiosos, *militares*, narcotraffickers from Colombia, corrupt officials. The build-



ings were dark at night. Almost nobody actually lived there.

Maracaibo is only two hours from the Colombian border. Colombian products, presumably smuggled, fill the supermarkets. I saw a *bachaquero* set up at a table in front of his house, in broad daylight, and stopped to inspect his goods. He was selling Polar precooked corn flour, at eight times the price on the label, but he also had Colombian flour.

On the eastern shore of Lake Maracaibo, in the territory of La Familia

Meleán, I turned off the highway at a Halliburton oil-treatment plant. It looked deserted. Huge tanks and towers, connected by catwalks, baked in the heat. A roof panel had blown loose from one of the tanks and now hung, bent like a giant brown tropical leaf, halfway to the ground. Even after all the nationalizations, P.D.V.S.A. depends heavily on foreign oil-services companies like Halliburton and Schlumberger to get the drilling done. But Schlumberger recently closed four platforms on Lake Maracaibo, because its bills weren't being paid. Argentine and Peruvian oil companies recently did the same, for the same reason, except that they closed thirty-six platforms. Halliburton was also cutting back. This was how production dwindled. Maybe it was for the best, I thought, on the lakeshore, behind the Halliburton plant. Tar-soaked sandbags, tar-soaked palm fronds, tar-soaked trees and trash littered the water's edge. The smell was heady and rank. It's not as if oil were the fuel of the future.

An old pickup truck was backed down to the shore, in the shade of some scrawny trees. A middle-aged couple were sitting quietly in plastic chairs in the bed of the truck, a cooler resting between them. They were drinking beer, having a picnic. They studied me as I approached. *Hola*. Yes, it was much nicer in the shade. There was even a little breeze off the lake, every now and then. This was a good spot, the man said, because the only road to it was the oil-company road, which had a surveillance camera on it.

So the plant was not abandoned?

Oh, no.

Yes, they lived in Maracaibo. They had been married forever—kids, grandkids. He worked in air-conditioner maintenance. "She waits in lines," he said. It was a joke, but not really. The couple wearily denounced Maduro. "All these lines and *bachaqueros* are his fault," she said. If they got the chance, they would both gladly vote him out.

I was being bitten by tiny insects. I asked if they ever went swimming here.

The woman laughed. "Yes," she said. "Sometimes. It's nice to cool off. But there's too much oil. We come out looking like Dalmatians." ♦

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